**Vincent S, Wapshott R.**

**Critical Realism and the Organizational Case Study: A Guide to Discovering Institutional Mechanisms.**

***In:*** **Edwards, PK; O'Mahoney, J; Vincent, S, ed. *Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.148-167.**

**Critical realism and the organizational case study:**
**A guide to discovering institutional mechanisms**

Steve Vincent (steve.vincent@newcastle.ac.uk) and Robert Wapshott

Published in: Edwards, P.K, O'Mahoney, J. and Vincent, S. [Eds.] (2014) *Studying Organizations using Critical Realism: A Pactiocal Guide*, Oxford, Oxford University Press pp. 148-67.

**Abstract:**

This paper explores organizational case study research as a means to discover and explain the novel *institutional mechanisms* they contain. It addresses three problems that CR researchers are confronted with as they develop case study research. Firstly, we consider the ontological question: "what is an organization?" In tackling this question we extend a framework that categorising the types of institutional mechanisms which CR researchers can expect to discover through organisational case study research. Secondly, we consider how researchers might structure their projects to develop novel insights about institutional mechanisms in their research practice. Here, we suggest *exploratory*, *exceptional* and *qualifying* case studies as three modes of engagement that researchers can employ to ensure or develop novel outcomes. Thirdly, we discuss the issue of data organization and management, specifically, where the researcher's goal is to explain novel institutional mechanism(s).

Keywords: critical realism, case study research, institutional mechanism

## Introduction

This contribution explores how critical realists can develop organizational case studies (OCSs) in order to explain the *institutional mechanisms* they contain. It starts by differentiating realist OCSs from other approaches before exploring realist approaches in more detail. A framework for dissecting the causal powers that affect institutional mechanisms is introduced and illustrated. Subsequently, using examples from labour process analyses, three approaches to developing explanations through OCSs are considered: *exploratory*, *exceptional* and *qualifying* cases. In the final sections, data analysis is discussed. The chapter concludes with an a summary case, taken from one of the author's own research projects, which is used to draw ideas together by demonstrating how theoretical generalizations can be achieved through a single case.

## Beyond social construction and empiricism

Realist OCSs are substantively different from both social constructionist and empiricist approaches. Stake's (2005) approach illustrates the former It has much in common with "thick description" in ethnographic practice (Geertz 1973): the goal is to articulate the subjective meaning systems of those studied so that they become accessible to the reader. Cases are worth knowing because they facilitate more informed interpretations of particular social realities. Cases communicate the multiple and frequently conflicting perspectives of diverse social agents. Social processes become reduced to subjective systems of meaning and how these lead people towards particular activities. Causal forces disappear because outcomes are 'multiply sequenced, multiply contextual more often than causal . . . interrelated and context bound, purposive but questionably determinative' (Stake 2005: 449). As a result, structural processes are reduced to mere epiphenomena of subjective realities.

CR scholars would assert that his approach is guilty of *upward conflation* (see Archer 2000). This is because social structures are entirely determined by the social constructions of the actors they contain: the possibilities of developing knowledge about independent organizational structures and how these affect behaviour is effectively denied. Whilst realists are certainly interested in subjective meaning systems and how these emerge, they are also interested in how these combine to inform collective social processes, as entities or *institutional mechanisms* in themselves.

An alternative but no less limited approach is the empiricist perspective, which has been substantially developed by Yin (2009). For him, OCSs should be developed with specific and instrumental purposes or "tests" in mind, with the data simply confirming or repudiating the theoretical postulate(s) examined. Each case becomes akin to an experiment where the goal is to deduce and, subsequently, test theory through a rigorous exploration of the data collected about a case or class of cases. If the deduced theory appears to be inadequate, the researcher is invited to abduct or infer a new explanation, after which further data gathering and analysis is prescribed to test the new explanation.

This approach bears some similarity with that of CR scholars (see also Ackroyd and Karlsson in this volume): all researchers are, after all, interested in cases or classes of cases that are inherently novel or under-researched. In these circumstances, outcomes are less likely to fit with existing theories and models, indicating opportunities to develop new forms of understanding. In these situations, we must reconsider or abandon our original frame(s) of reference in order to account for the novelty we observe (see also Burawoy 1998). However, Yin's approach is limited because there is nothing beyond abduction and nothing to know beyond what we confirm through the data themselves. *Deeper* levels disappear from view and retroduction disappears as an analytical device.

Realists are attracted to OCS research not only because they can help us abduct novel theories, but also because they want a better explanation of broader social mechanisms (class-based, racial,

religions, sectoral, national, cultural. etc.) that operate through a case or class of cases. Knowledge of these mechanisms often requires retroduction: establishing the contextual conditions that give rise to the particular mechanisms we are observing (for a more complete exploration of abduction and retroduction, see O'Mahoney and Vincent in this volume). These mechanisms may not be obvious or explicit within the case itself and must be worked out theoretically from a broader analysis of the setting, often through comparison (see Kessler and Bach in this volume). There is no empirical "test" that can act as absolute confirmation. Rather, and as will be demonstrated, the theory and data must be "fitted together" as an explanation of what is observed.

**Studying organizations**

When developing explanations of the antecedents, causal powers and potentials of institutional mechanisms it is useful to start with ontological assertions about what an organizations are and how they are formed. Here, the realist concept *relational emergence* is particularly useful. This concept has been developed by Elder-Vass (2010), who applies it to causal powers of all *entities*. For him, an entity is 'a *persistent whole formed of a set of parts that is structured by the relations between these parts*' (Elder-Vass 2010: 17, original emphasis). *Relations* are how the parts interact to become causally efficacious. Put another way, they have causal powers because they are articulated, combined or configured to form particular wholes. Finally, *emergence* is both the process by which something comes into being and, subsequently, the 'relation amongst the parts of an entity that gives that entity as a whole the ability to have a particular ... causal impact' (Elder-Vass 2010: 23). Organizations, then, are made of people, who form the "parts" of emergent organizational structures. The specific configurations that they form and roles (norms of behaviour) that they embody structure the relations they contain in ways that ensure that the organization reproduces itself, as otherwise the organization would cease to exist. In other words,

it is particular configurations of norm-based activities that define the distinctiveness of specific institutional mechanisms.

Whilst it is possible to develop OCSs that trace the conception and development of an organization, most studies are of organizations that already exist. As a result we must abduct and retroduct the causal powers and antecedents that are relevant to the organization(s) studied. To do this, research designs must be sensitive to the history of the case(s) examined (see Mutch in this volume), in order to understand the emergence of causal powers of the "parts" of organizations and the broader context(s) within which they reside. For example, if we are exploring the causal properties of a team we need to understand how and why the team came to be constituted in a particular way, the abilities and preferences of the people they contain and the organizational system (production unit, corporation, economy) that they reside within. Alternatively, if we want to explore the production unit we need to understand the teams, offices, workshops (etc.) that constitute the production unit, as well as the organizational system (corporation, value chain) that they reside within. In short, our research designs need to be sensitive to the temporally stratified nature of the world. Analysts must to look "upwards" to the complex array of context(s) that act through and influence patterns of behaviour in the organizational entity studied and "downwards" for how they are constituted of complex sets of interacting subunits.

*Classifying causal mechanisms*

In order to undertake such a stratified examination of cases, identifying the significant types of causal influence that affect organizations is a useful starting point. In this area, the work of Elder-Vass (2010) is, again, particularly useful because it argues that relational emergence is affected by causal processes across various dimensions. Firstly, and as outlined above, causal powers of different levels interact, so it is important to distinguish *upwards causation* and *downwards causation*, as well as how an entity affects others that reside at the same level. Secondly, there are also separable causal influences associated with norms and rules (*normative powers and*

*potentials*), on the one hand, and organizational configurations (*configurational powers and potentials*) on the other. In Figure 8.1, these types of powers and potentials are combined to suggest that four forms of causal process are particularly common in organizational research.

INSERT FIGURE 8.1 ABOUT HERE

Normative powers and potentials emerge from enduring patterns in the activities of agents who constitute specific institutional mechanisms. For example, employees tend to have specific levels of absenteeism and turnover, intensity in work activity, skill use and patterns of social interaction. These activities, which constitute the habitual patterns of everyday life that continually recreate and, potentially, transform specific institutional mechanisms, can be considered in terms of their antecedents and causes. It is useful to consider this normative dimension of institutional mechanisms because analysing typical behaviour facilitates a better understanding of participant actions, how these are affected by broader or external contexts and the internal motivations people have as they engage with particular routines.

Configurational powers and potentials, on the other hand, are those that owe their existence to specific spatial distribution of people, where 'there is a sense in which the members of the organization work together like parts of a machine to produce collective effect' (Elder-Vass, 2010: 157). The archetypal example is Adam Smith's pin factory: rather than each individual producing whole pins, the factory method breaks down the production of pins into a series of specialized roles, the combination of which produces substantially more pins. Here, it is the specific combination of effort, rather than the powers of atomized individuals, that is a causal property of the group or institution. It is useful to consider this dimension because differently ordered and sized institutions have different powers and potentials, even if actors constituting them reproduce similar norms and values (observing a game between unevenly matched opponents usually demonstrates this point).

In upwards causation, the causal powers of the parts interact to affect the causal powers of the whole (*superconstruction*). For example, changing interpersonal relationships at the level of teams can affect the speed of production at the level of the production unit. In downwards causation, the emergent relations are altered as a consequence of transformations within a 'higher level' organizational entity or system, of which the case is partially constitutive (*intrastructuration*). For example, when an individual joins an organization she typically agrees to act in accordance to an assigned role (as an employee, treasurer, team member, etc). In effect, the role incumbent is altered as a result of accepting the role. In this case, 'the higher level entity ... acts *through* the individual; those properties that the individual acquires by occupying the role are essentially properties of the organization localised in the individual' (Elder-Vass 2010: 158, original emphasis).

Examining adherence to organizational roles, such as the behaviour of an employee in a corporation, facilitates exploration of normative powers and potentials. These powers and potentials are also apparent within broader social fields (see also Mutch in this volume), such as national systems, and a good example of a study that considers this type of power and potential is that of Muller (1999). He studied the uptake of human resource policy and practices within a class of cases (corporations within the German organizational system), and found that some human resource practices (job security, sophisticated training and employee involvement) occurred automatically and without the activity of human resources departments because the legal and regulatory rule system demanded or encouraged certain institutional practices within German employers. When human resource departments attempted to implement other practices (notably appraisals and performance related pay) these did not happen automatically and met with resistance because they conflicted with cultural norms (such as those concerning equity, autonomy and trust) and other institutional mechanisms (such as trade unions) that operated within the same organizational system. Here, normative dispositions that were reproduced within

a specific national regulatory regime and culture led to specific patterns in the reproduction of human resource practices at lower organizational levels.

The powers and potentials of norms act in both directions – the normative logics of local groups can have particular consequences for institutional mechanisms at levels above. One study that reflects this logic is that of Taylor and Bain (2003), who analysed workplace humour and collective identity in a call centre in the UK. In what was described as a rather oppressive organizational regime, workers used informal humour and cynicism about managerial motives to find space to “be themselves” despite their negative experience of work. Subsequently, trade unions tapped into these local norms and, in doing so, engendered more formal acts of resistance to managerial prerogative. In this case, local joking rituals came to have organizational consequences well beyond the levels at which emerged: they became collectively articulated to challenge the dominance of management ideas.

As with normative powers and potentials (and whilst recognizing that the two are empirically interrelated) configurational powers and potentials also act in two directions. Causal influences in both directions and of different types can be observed in Barker’s (1993) exploration of "self-managed" teamwork. He explored how the devolution of authority to teams transformed local norms which, in turn, had broader organizational consequences. Initially, a specific configurational change, in which supervisors were removed and responsibilities devolved to teams, was imposed "top down" by a senior managers who wanted to encourage cooperation at the level of the group. Subsequent to this configurational change, and what is, perhaps, most interesting about this case, novel "bottom up" developments ensued. Specifically, and in the absence of an authority figure, workers started sanctioning one another and became less accepting of "slack" than the old supervisory regime: workers actually internalized broader organizational goals and norms more strongly. This stronger internalization of organizational norms had consequences at higher levels: self-control within the workforce led to reduced supervisory costs

and increasing productivity. At the same time, power-relations, which were highly visible within more bureaucratic supervisory regimes, were more obscure.

Finally, Thompson (2003) offers an example of a more configurational relationship that operated from the top down. His analysis, which focuses on what he calls 'financialized economies' such as the UK, considered how local employment institutions were affected by these systems. He argues that 'forms of financial competition reflect the requirement to meet the expectations of the capital market' (p. 366). Consequential forms of financial organization, such as high remuneration packages for senior managers, effectively tied their interests to those of organizational owners and shareholders, encouraging short-term strategies (such as divestment, delayering and downsizing) to secure more immediate returns for owners and shareholders. Such organizational developments, which operate at the top of organizational structures, have direct consequences for management practice and experiences of employment. In particular, attempts to meet employee expectations, in terms of better jobs and remuneration, for example, are inhibited because these outcomes would be 'at odds under the inter-related impacts of globalization, the shift to shareholder value in capital markets and systemic rationalization across the whole value chain of firms' (p. 371).

It is notable that both Thompson and Muller do not extend their analyses using specific case studies, so they are more akin to the 'generative institutional analysis' outlined in Chapter 2. However, both offer good illustrations of how a broader normative rules transmitted through organized systems impact on institutional mechanisms at lower organizational levels. As such, these are studies of a class of cases and also demonstrate the interaction of levels: the higher level acts through the case(s) examined. Here our OCSs cease to be *of* the level being studied, and different classes of organization and types of case (governments, legislators, councils, corporations, etc.) constitute the broader organizational system examined.

These exemplar studies also illustrate the intimate interconnectedness and practical inseparability of normative and configurational powers and potentials: the dimensions always come in combination. The distinction is purely conceptual. The human resources outcome in Muller's study depended on a combination of normative and configurational powers and potentials at national and local organizational levels; local normative behaviours in Taylor and Bain's study transformed organizational capabilities at higher organizational levels; organizational changes in Barker's study transformed how actors embodied norms and this had broader organizational consequences; and, in Thompson's analysis, patterns of organization at the level of the financial system limited what managers could deliver at a local level. In all these studies a particular organization of norms was configured in a particular way to inform the institutional mechanism observed. Despite this, we assert it both possible and useful to distinguish between configurational and normative powers and potentials that constitute institutional mechanisms.

**Developing novel insights**

When using OCSs to develop new knowledge about institutional mechanisms, it is particularly useful in the design phase of the research project to reflect on existing theory and knowledge. At this stage an effort can be made to ensure that the research is aimed at something new or under-explored. Where existing theory fails to explain what is observed there is an opportunity to abduct and retroduct new forms of understanding. It should be noted, however, that the research processes is not typically a linear progression from identifying novelty to abduction and then retroduction. It is usually quite messy and is likely to involve false starts as the researcher oscillates between exploring what we know, on the one hand, and considering that which is 'out there' but inadequately explained, on the other.

There are, however, specific tactics we can employ in the effort to maximize our chances developing novel research, which are explored in this section. To illustrate these tactics, examples

will be drawn from research that uses Labour Process Theory (LPT). LPT has been chosen, in particular, because it is a well established body of theory and related research, so there are many studies to draw on. It has also been argued to be generally consonant with critical realism (see Thompson and Vincent 2010). Initially, a little space is dedicated to exploring this theoretical tradition because this will create space to consider the particular role of theory in realist OCs.

*Labour Process Theory*

LPT aims to explain how conditions within and beyond workplaces interact to affect emergent labour processes at any specific institutional level. Downwardly, the capitalist system is seen to possess particular causal imperatives within institutional mechanisms. Specifically, firm survival depends on the creation of value within production and the appropriation of this value by the firm's owners (profit or valorization). This is because, in cases where firms are unproductive and profits are inadequate, owners and managers are impelled to transform their businesses and investments, or they may lose both. In an upward direction, human effort at the point of production is essentially indeterminate (prosaically, the effort we put into the working day is not constant) so that the firm is also faced with the problem of converting human *potential* into actual effort in order to ensure capital is extracted from labour at a rate that is comparable with competitors – as outlined above, the alternative induces the potential for firm closure (see Littler, 1990). That is, if the conversion is not successful at local level, implications are felt higher up the system. Jaros (2010: 71, emphasis original; see also Edwards 1986 for the origin of 'structured antagonism') succinctly summarizes the theoretical propositions that follow from this as:

> capital's need to *control* labour; a logic of *accumulation* that impels refinement of technology and administration; a fundamental, *structured antagonism* between capital and labour; and because it is the place where labour is valorised, the 'labour process', the point of production, is *privileged* for analyses.

Edwards (1990) also suggests that, as labour processes are bound within specific institutional mechanisms (such as teams, divisions, firms, conglomerates and supply chains), they are also relatively autonomous, constituting institutional mechanisms in themselves which evolve according to their own logics.

In summary, LPT uses a set of general abstractions about the nature of both the human condition *and* capitalist competition to make assertions about how these combine to inform particular tendencies within institutional mechanism (hierarchical organization, 'structured antagonism', etc.). Subsequently, the researcher is left to explore how these tendencies play out within specific organizational settings. Ultimately, and pretty much as soon as the researcher enters the field, she is presented with a bewildering array of opportunities to explore how the labour process is manifest in a particular situation, exceptions to its assertions and areas in need of qualification. There are, as a result, ample grounds for a range of case-based analyses, which have become a methodological mainstay within this line of research.

*Exploratory and exceptional cases*

In *exploratory case studies* the goal is to discover the consequences, at specific level, of a specific organizational development. These can either be known changes within the context (governance structures, legal regulations, strategic positions, etc.) or constituents (internal structures, normative practices). The key point is that the researcher is or becomes aware of a change that has occurred or is occurring with the case study being undertaken to see what happens as a result of the change. The research of Barker (1993), outlined previously, offers a good illustration of this type of logic. As we saw, he was interested in the consequences of self-managed teams which were a relatively novel organizational development at the time of his study. He identified a manager from a firm who had recently implemented self-managed teams and used this relationship to develop an ethnographic case-based analysis of the organizational consequences of

this change. In doing so, he articulated how this innovation had consequences at the level of the subject, the team and the broader organization within which the team resided.

One does not have to identify any specific novel variance in the conditions of an organization before one enters the field: it is possible to select a case simply because it seems to be different from other cases, and it is often possible to discover a case which you thought typical to be exceptional in some unexpected way. The logic of the argument by Stake (2005) is that all organizations are unique and therefore exceptional to an extent, but they also share features within particular groupings (see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Where there are marked differences within an organization when compared to that which is thought to be normal for that field or class of cases, it is possible explain the novel mechanism that impelled the observed difference. Such *exceptional cases studies* have the analytical purpose of working through the combination of forces (both within and beyond the organization investigated) that provide a more adequate account of why the case does not do what we might expect The orientating question is "why is my case exceptional or different and what can this tell us about the world?"

A good example of this logic is the research of Jenkins et al. (2010). They explore the case of 'VoiceTel', a call centre that had been particularly successful and was expanding. Existing labour process research suggests that call centres in the UK operate with relatively oppressive regimes of surveillance and control which render them sites of tension and resistance (see Taylor and Bain 2003). However, there were very few observations of worker malcontent at VoiceTel. Workers said they enjoyed their jobs and followed the rules. Indeed, they internalized the rules, with the owners of the firm benefiting greatly 'from the value that emanated from hiring women who were capable of utilizing their socialized selves to provide quality customer interactions' (Jenkins et al. 2010: 561). The problem was to understand why relationships at VoiceTel were cordial when similar organizations were generally characterized as negative working environments.

Whilst Jenkins et al. (2010) do not, themselves, assert that they abduct a novel generative mechanism, this is implicit in their account. For example, they describe how the observed consensual behaviour was 'informed by multiple influences beyond management prescription' (p. 546). More specifically, they describe how the general conditions of the local labour market (in which there was few 'good' jobs), the hiring policy (which created a convivial atmosphere by using recommendations and workers' social connections), and the form of work organization (which gave the workers control over their relationships with clients), all marked the VoiceTel environment as 'different'. As such, they demonstrate that it was the particular conditions within and surrounding this labour process that rendered it exceptional.

*The qualifying case*

Whilst theory has an essential role in our explanations, it is important to recognize that theories are partial and necessarily so. Arguably, the best theories are relatively parsimonious to the extent that they are not seeking to explain the sum of all causal forces but, instead, elucidate the particular connectedness of specific levels where these either have not been assessed (a deduced inference) or are difficult to assess locally and empirically (associated with 'deep' causes). Given the partial nature of all theory and the complex, open and multiply determined nature of reality, theories will inevitably need to be *qualified* in relation to particular circumstances. We make such qualifications in order to understand the intersections of different causes that may operate at different levels and combine to affect the particular events we observe. Here, the effort is to develop a better causal explanation of institutional mechanisms by exploring the interactions between powers of different types.

LPT is, quite explicitly, developed from a limited set of theoretical resources (see Thompson, 1990). Whilst it extends from a limited range of assertions about the human condition and capitalist competition, it is rather looser and vaguer about specific manifestations of labour

processes (which are left open to the empirical and theoretical assertions of the researcher). It does not, for example, say much about other phenomena (whether ideological, technical, gendered, racial, emotional, regulatory, etc.) which transcend labour processes and also affect outcomes. From the point of view of supporters of LPT, these influences are important and which is important in any location and how will be a matter for empirical analyses. Equally however, they are also matter for other theoretical resources (theories about politics, technology, gender, ethnicity, and so on). As a result, there is often a need to combine different theoretical lenses (*theoretical pluralism*) to build better causal explanation of the range of generative mechanisms that most adequately explains the institutional mechanism observed.

A good example of a qualifying case is offered by Cockburn (1983). She analysed the intersections of gendered, technological and organization within the labour processes of the printing industry. Her analysis of the labour processes revealed, as LPT might predict, that managers used technological and organizational developments in the effort to increase their control (see also Braverman 1974). Alongside this, she also observed how a group of skilled men maintained their position as 'skilled' workers, despite the apparently negative labour process context. They did this, specifically, by distinguishing their work from that of women and preserving their masculine approach and values. From a CR point of view, the causal mechanisms explained within the analysis combined gendered processes and workplace processes, which intersected within a particular institutional mechanism. In demonstrating the significance of this mechanism, Cockburn accounts for an important general tendency towards male dominance at work.

**Analysing data**

As the goal of any case study is to explain something new, the outcome of the research will not be known in advance. However, some projects are easier to guide and develop than others. Targeting

one's efforts can be relatively straightforward when the goal of the research is to explain something quite specific, such as 'what are the consequences of policy X for organization Y?' However, targeting one's attention may be less easy where the researcher is motivated by a more general interest, such as 'why is firm X unsuccessful?' In order to encourage movement towards a better understanding when one has less defined interests or an unknown set of causes, this section explores modes of data analysis and tactics for using theory in developing understanding of institutional mechanisms. We develop the point in Chapter 2, that realist research designs typically start in a more expansive and exploratory phase before targeting what seems to matter most in explaining the specific mechanisms observed.

As we have seen, causal powers do not have to be actual or manifest to be real: they can be deep and hidden from view. Abducting the mechanisms apparent and retroducing their antecedents and causes can thus be difficult. However, and in the effort to explain institutional mechanisms, researchers may engage with specific analytical tactics to unpack the configurational, normative and broader contextual conditions to which they relate. These are 1) analyses of how actors and groups are articulated and positioned – *configurational analysis*, 2) analyses of how the people tend to respond to their situations –*normative analysis*, 3) an analyses of how broader contextual conditions manifest themselves within the case - *field analysis*, and, 4) analyses of how (1), (2) and (3) can be combined to explain the genesis of causal powers and potentials of the emergent institutional mechanism – *institutional explanation*. Below a brief section is dedicated to each of these types of analysis. Subsequently, the final section offers a summary case, which describes how these analytical stages worked themselves out in a specific research project.

*Configurational analysis:*

From the early stages of an OCS project it is useful to start developing an analysis of any institution's configuration. This involves a kind of 'thick description' of the structure of activities

that inhere within the case. The objective is not to elucidate, in detail, why behaviour is meaningful to the actors involved (cf. Stake 2005) but to set the scene in such a way as to account for the articulation of the particular institutional mechanism that interests us.

There is no prescription as to which data are needed to undertake this analytical process, although interviews, organizational charts and other documents are likely to be particularly useful. The goal is to abduct a basic outline of the specific powers and potentials of the institutional mechanism observed by describing where people are, the sub-units they form (if this is the case), the technologies they use and/or develop, what their (and the technologies') capabilities and potentials are, how people tend to behave and how these things tend to combine to produce particular outcomes (levels of growth, productivity, happiness, conflict or whatever other regularity takes one's interest).

This account may also explore the normative expectations generally associated with particular roles, or how the organization is supposed to work, as this is often quite different from what is actually the case. The overall goal is to identify the size, shape and general pattern of activities associated with a particular institutional mechanism, which can subsequently be explored and refined. The outcome can be likened to a road map of the institutional mechanisms explored. As the map is constructed and the data exhausted, a point of *configurational saturation* is reached (see also Glaser and Strauss 1967). After this point, no new data about agents' various locations and activities will be discovered, and a specifically articulated set of actors will have been described.

*Normative analysis*

The second but by no means separate or independent type of analysis *normative analysis*. Here, in a manner congruent with social constructionist approaches, the objective is to explain how and

why actors and groups of actors behave as they do in specific situations. The goal is to explore their *projective tendencies*: their behavioural norms and expectations, as well as the extent to which norms are followed consistently. Matters are particularly interesting where there is a gap between *normative expectations* (such as managerial orders, operating procedures, legal requirements, which are often defined as part of the field analysis) and *normative tendencies* (or how organizational members actually behave in specific contexts). Observations of difference highlight areas of tension that are likely to be significant. Alternative normative pressures coexist, such as where one's peers and one's superiors have distinctive orientations to the content and nature of work. Understanding which norms take precedence, when and where, as well as how they are incongruently related, creates space to explore social dominance and conflict within local experiences.

Interviews and observation are particularly useful for normative analyses. It is usually impossible to interview and observe everyone within a given field, but one should try to canvas a diverse cross section of different types of respondent in the effort to ensure a broad palette of norms and values is covered. Some theoretical replication, in which similar samples are taken from compared cases, may also be employed to work out how similar mechanisms play out in different settings (see also Yin 2009). As a rule of thumb, it is important to try to interview respondents from all the social groups within the field(s) examined, although practical matters often prevent this happening so that one must also be led by the regularity one is seeking to explain and the resources available (see also Stake 2005).

The goal is to develop an effective appreciation of how the projects of different groups vary and to invite participants to reflect on how they frame their own situations. This stage of the analysis is complete at the point of *agential saturation* (see also Glaser and Strauss 1967), when the normative tendencies of all the groups within the institutional mechanism are known and understood from the point of view of the participants.

*Field analysis*

In field analysis an effort is made to describe and explain the conditions of the broader organizational system and the other organizations to which our case relates in order to better explain how these are causally implicated in the patterns of events we observe. This broader analysis can be guided by existing theories that purport to explain something about the empirical markers we come to be interested in. In effect, existing theory can be used to assist the retroductive step 'backwards' from the empirical regularities observed to the contextual features that help better explain why matters are so and not otherwise. So, and reusing an example introduced above (Jenkins at al. 2010), if we become interested in the apparent lack of tension and conflict in a call centre, various conditions are likely to affect actor choices. Some of these, such as the tightness (or otherwise) of the local labour market, may suggest themselves as more salient or important causes of local outcomes than others, such as the availability of broadband from a local internet provider. Whilst the availability of broadband may say something about conditions of existence of the call centre, the analysis of the labour markets allows one to make a connection between levels that appears to have implications for workers' opinions about their own work: labour market theory suggests that where labour markets contain fewer opportunities people may be more likely to look positively on jobs that are viewed more negatively where there are more opportunities available. As we (theoretically) explore potential causes of specific patterns of events it becomes possible to assemble a range of contextual features that can be combined to explain better patterns of activity in the specific institutional context.

It is usually important to undertake field analyses, even where researchers are more narrowly interested in explaining the particular consequences of a known change (of the 'what are the consequences of policy X for organization Y?' type). As demonstrated within the analysis of Muller (1999), the implementation specific human resources policies was, in practice, mediated

by norms and regulations that were properties of a broader organizational system (the German national economy) rather than any specific organization. As such, it is important that researchers immerse themselves within the minutiae of the case and the environment that their case forms part of, because only with intimate knowledge of the constitution and external conditions of the case is the researcher able to use retroduct which contextual conditions have a significant impact on local activities (either through comparison or recourse to existing theory).

*Institutional explanation*

An important goal of realist OCSs is to understand how micro-level normative practices condition the causal powers of institutional mechanisms through an analysis that also accounts for broader context(s), which affect the possibilities for action and actor choices within our cases. The previous three forms of analysis concentrate on different elements of this equation: configurational analysis reveals more about *what* institutional mechanisms are, their powers and potential; normative analysis reveals more about *how* the institutional mechanisms are routinely reproduced; field analysis reveals more about *why* the institutional mechanisms are as they are and not otherwise by revealing how their specific manifestation is affected by conditions that operate at other levels. In short, by combining our configurational, normative and field analyses we can build better institutional explanations of the specific mechanisms we observe and the causal forces that affect their specific manifestation.

As these forms of analyses are combined, the researcher's task is to refine their accounts and descriptions to distil the separable but interacting influences of the various significant causal powers apparent within their cases. As we saw above, at least four types of causal power are significant for the purposes of revealing the causes of institutional mechanisms (see Figure 8.1). When developing institutional explanations, these become useful as targets for description:

1. *Downwards normative causal explanation*. Descriptive analyses and theories combine to explain how normative expectations within the broader context (cultures, laws, ideas, strategies, etc.) have an impact on the causal properties of institutional mechanism studied (see Muller, 1999).

2. *Upwards normative causal explanation*. Descriptive analyses and theories combine to explain the ways in which normative practices within the organization studied have an impact on the causal properties of the institutional mechanism studied (see Taylor and Bain, 2003).

3. *Downwards configurational causal explanation*. Descriptive analyses and theories combine to explain how the properties of a broader organizational systems (possibly at multiple levels) interact to have an impact on the causal properties of the institutional mechanism studied (see Thompson, 2003).

4. *Upwards configurational causal explanations*. Descriptive analyses and theories combine to explain how subunits are articulated to have an impact on the causal properties of the institutional mechanism studied (see Barker, 1993).

As multiple causal influences interact to shape outcomes in any institutional mechanisms, whichever level it might occupy, the explanatory accounts we generate will necessarily employ these causal targets variously to illuminate the peculiarities and commonalities of the case(s) at hand.

**Illustrative case**

In this final section, an effort is made explore how these forms of analysis and explanation building were developed in a single case study that sought to explain a particularly complex institutional mechanism (Vincent 2008). The case study was a "Strategic Partnership" between Govco (a large and bureaucratic government department) and Futuretech (a multinational

business software development specialist). The Partnership was established so that Govco could access Futuretech's stock of in-house technology and expertise, which could be used to improve on Govco's unique proprietary IT systems. As well as making a profit from the arrangement, Futuretech would benefit from having a large and high-profile client who could act as a referee with prospective clients. The Partnership emerged to manage the distinctive ways that each organization depended on the relationship.

*The institutional mechanisms as a configuration of norms*

Configurational analysis revealed the existence of a group of senior managers from both organizations (the Strategic Partnership) who worked together through a series of meetings and committees in the effort to achieve the objectives of both organizations. This group was originally constituted of IT experts, formally employed by either Govco or Futuretech, who knew a great deal about technological possibilities, capabilities and susceptibilities within both organizations. They were given responsibility, firstly, for defining the work Futuretech would deliver and, subsequently, ensuring that it was delivered. At a basic level, the Partnership was an institutional mechanism that sought to understand Govco needs, Futuretech's capabilities, and how these could be brought together for the benefit of both organizations.

The managers of the Partnership had a particular ability to act, which gave them a good deal of latitude to decide what "good performance" looked like. They could define the "scopes of work" undertaken, and some technologies were much easier to deliver than others. As a result, where performance dipped below expectations any underperformance could be reconciled against easier to deliver work. Contractual targets, which stipulated that the price per unit of technology delivered would decline over the 5 years of the contract, were consistently delivered. So, in some ways the relationship was effective: it hit contractual targets and IT user surveys showed improved perceptions of performance. However, there was also evidence to suggest this

cooperation was less than effective – some less senior respondents complained about the effectiveness of the technologies delivered and suggested that, over time, Futuretech became able to deliver increasingly "off the peg" rather than "bespoke" technologies for its partner. Ultimately, it is likely to have been more generally recognized that the institutional mechanism was failing to deliver as effectively as it might: the contract was not renewed after the 5 year term ended.

This view of failure was not shared within the Partnership: the normative analysis suggested that members of this Partnership organization believed in its success. They conformed to particular values and norms. They boasted that it was difficult for outsiders to tell who was from Govco and who was from Futuretech. They saw the value of "working in Partnership" (in practice, this meant Futuretech should be allowed to make a profit, with the proviso that Govco should also have access to better and cheaper technology). All those within the Partnership had a strong interest in the organizations being a success (future careers depended on it!), and despite apparent failings, both sides extolled the merits of the relationship.

This brief description suggests that a combination of configurational and normative analysis may be used to produce what can be described as a *level-abstracted* view of an institutional mechanism (Elder-Vass 2010: 49), or one that considers the impact of the whole entity in isolation from its context. The existence of an institutional mechanism (the Partnership) works itself out as (1) a particular set of local enablements and constraints, which defined Partnership's "room for manoeuvre", and (2) a particular constellation of people with specific agential potentials (skills, forms of knowledge, attitudes, etc.). However, this description throws up as many questions as answers. For example, why did the Partnership have so much latitude to determine its own "successes"? And, why could Futuretech get away with delivering apparently more shoddy and less customer focussed technology as the relationship developed? Answering these questions involves taking retroductive steps "backwards" to consider the antecedents that

pre-formed relations and the possibilities manifest within the institutional mechanism itself. At this point, field analysis and existing theory became an invaluable tool.

*Theorizing the significance of field forces*

As part of the development of this case analysis, the research questioned how others theorized the structure and operation of similar cooperative inter-organizational forms, resulting in a trawl of the available literature. In order to develop a better causal explanation (one which could account for the questions that remained unanswered in 'level-abstracted' configurational and normative analysis), various theories were considered and combined in the effort to provide a more effective insight into the antecedents that conditioned the Partnership. Three theories, in particular, appeared to be useful. These were *transaction cost economics*, which highlights how inter-organizational contracting can be affected by product developed how this product relates to the organizations involved in the exchange; *resource dependency theory*, which highlights each partner's dependency on the other's resources and abilities can affect relations; and, *institutional theory*, which suggests that broader ideological trends and norm enforcing mechanisms shaped local behaviour. There is not space here to do justice to the complexities of these theoretical frameworks or why they were selected. Instead, we explain *how* these theories were incorporated within an explanatory framework for the institutional mechanisms observed.

An important first step in developing CR models of the generative processes that cause specific institutional mechanisms is to interrogate any theoretical resource which claims explanatory power over our class of cases the point of view of a CR meta-theory. The goal is to establish the extent to which it is consonant with and can be assimilated into CR explanations in general. As the vast majority of theories are constructed by people who are not realists, there are numerous opportunities for qualifying exactly what a CR explanation may take from *any* theoretical resource (indeed, this is an explicit objective of Vincent 2008). In short, theoretical assimilation

creates opportunities to develop novel explanations of specific event regularities by incorporating insights from the various theories available.

For some theories (in the case of this research project, resource dependency theory and institutional theory), this can be a relatively unproblematic endeavour because the theories in question are relatively parsimonious in specifying the things they can account for (even if the theory's protagonists are not always aware of their specific limitations). However, transaction cost economics is based on an economist's view of human agency (wherein all that matters is the personal utility maximizing behaviour of atomistic agents), which is incompatible with the richer view of human agency advocated by most realists (see Marks and O'Mahoney in this volume). Some theoretical reframing was thus necessary to redeploy this conceptual resource within an overarching critical realist explanation.

This was considered important groundwork because the theory seemed to talk to the data itself: our particular choice of theories is not arbitrary but results from establishing an intimate relationship between a theory that more adequately explains *something* about the antecedent causes of the institutional mechanisms explored, on the one hand, and data from the case, on the other. Specifically, transaction cost economics suggested that, where contractual mechanisms govern complex, uncertain, changeable and idiosyncratic tasks or undertakings, the actors involved will necessarily have greater to autonomy in determining their own ends. Data from the field confirmed that technologies were developing quickly within the market and that Govco's IT systems were so idiosyncratic that few outside the Partnership could tell what good performance looked like (benchmarks were used, but none was considered adequate). So, the technologies in the field that surrounded the Partnership were found to be complex, uncertain, changeable and idiosyncratic. This helped within the theoretical model developed by Vincent (2008) because it accounts for the relative autonomy that senior managers enjoyed within the Partnership.

In this case, the theory is rooted at a particular level (in the field of technology that transcended the Partnership). These were not part of the Partnership as an institutional mechanism in its own right; but they were a consequential condition of the technologies the Partnership was obliged to deal with. Suffice to say, a similar story can be told for resource dependency theory. The processes of the Partnership accrued knowledge on the side of Futuretech as it developed new technologies for its client. This resulted in a temporally emergent imbalance in the expertise of Govco's and Futuretech's agents, who constituted the Partnership. Futuretech's agents thus became increasingly powerful in asserting their own technological imperative and interests, even if these did not meet Govco's needs exactly. This helps account for a particular tendency in the Partnership, in which the value for money Govco received seemed to decline as the relationship endured.

Finally institutional theory, which suggests institutional mechanisms are conditioned by dominant organizing logics that operate across broader social formations, contributed to the explanation by connecting the Partnership's tendency to extol its own successes with local career interests and the broader public sector policy regime. At the time of the Partnership's inception, private sector provision was prioritized over public sector provision as a matter of policy prescription, owing to a generalized ideological faith in the relative efficiency of private sector providers (even where transactional considerations suggested this may not actually be the case). In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that few were shouting about the Partnership's failures.

*Developing transferable explanations*

The analysis of the Partnership was used to develop a theoretical model of the generative mechanism that could account for the specific empirical tendencies observed within the case. Having trawled the literature for explanatory theories and considered these in relation to the data available, three sets of ideas were used to enrich the explanation of the Partnership. These

theories added richness to the explanation by rendering more explicit the causal dynamics that existed between the Partnership and its antecedents, including the material (e.g. technology/resource) and ideational (norms, discourses) phenomena to which it related. Ultimately, this combination of theories provided a new supporting model, which made it easier to understand how the context of the Partnership affected its actors' patterns of behaviour.

In conclusion, theoretical models developed in OCSs become a transferable resource in themselves that can be reapplied in similar analyses of similar institutional mechanisms. More specifically, and in relation to the Partnership, the combination of insights about idiosyncratic technical conditions, mutual resource dependencies and a supporting institutional rule systems, which inhered within this case, are likely to be present in cooperative inter-organizational forms more generally. This model can, then, be used as a basis for building alternative explanations of the particular configuration of contextual determinants that patinas other similar structures. Knowledge obtained about a single case study is, as a result, not confined to the boundaries of the case itself (Stake 2005) but is theoretically transferable across a class of cases. Thus, the theoretical models we develop through our OCs, as we explain the peculiarities of our cases, also help articulate the specific conditions that makes a class of cases classifiable in terms of their common antecedents. It is this form of theoretical generalization that realist OCSs should seek to extend and develop.

References:

Ackroyd, S. (2004) 'Methodology and management and organisational research: some implications of critical realism', in Fleetwood, S. and Ackroyd, S. [Eds.] *Critical Realist Applications in Organisation and Management Studies*, London: Routledge (pp: 137-163)

Ackroyd, S. (2010) 'Critical Realism, Organisation Theory, Methodology and the Emerging Science of Reconfiguration' in Koslowski, P. [Ed.] *Elements of Philosophy in Management and Organisation*, London: Springer (pp. 47-78)

Archer, M. (2000) *Being human: the problem of agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Archer, M. (2006) 'Structure, Culture and Agency', in Jacobs, M. and Weiss Harahan, N. (Eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Barker, J. (1993) 'Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managed Teams' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38(3): 408-437

Burawoy, M (1998) 'The Extended Case Method', *Sociological Theory*, 16(1): 4-33

DiMaggio, P. & Powell, W. (1983) 'The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147-60

Edwards, P. K. (1986) *Conflict at Work*, Oxford: Blackwell

Edwards, P.K. (1990). Understanding conflict in the labour process: the logic and autonomy of struggle, in D. Knights and H. Willmott (Eds.), *Labour Process Theory*, London: Macmillan.

Elder-Vass, D. (2010) *The Causal Power of Social Structures Emergence, Structure and Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Geertz, C. (1973) Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture, in Geertx, C. [Ed.] *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books (pp.3-30)

Glaser, B. and Straus, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Chicago: Aldine

Jaros S (2010) The core theory: Critiques, defences and advances. In: Thompson P and Smith C (eds) *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 70–88.

Jenkins S, Delbridge R, and Roberts R (2010) Emotional management in a mass customised call centre: examining skill and knowledgeability in interactive services work, *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(3): 546-564.

Muller, M. (1999) 'Human Resource Management under Institutional Constraints: The Case of Germany', *British Journal of Management*, 10, S31–S44

Sake, R. (2005) 'Qualitative Case Studies', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. [Eds.] *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* [Third Edition] London: Sage.

Taylor, P. Bain, P. (2003), ''Subterranean worksick blues': humour as subversion in two call centres', *Organization Studies*, (24)9: 1487-509

Thompson, P. (1990) 'Crawling from the Wreckage: The Labour Process and The Politics of Production', in D. Knights and H. Willmott (Eds.), *Labour Process Theory*. London: Macmillan.

Thompson, P. (2003) 'Disconnected capitalism: or why employers can't keep their side of the bargain'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 17 (2): 359-378

Thompson, P. and Vincent, S. (2010) 'Beyond the Boundary: Labour Process Theory and Critical Realism', in Thompson, P. and Smith, C. [Eds.] *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis,* London: Palgrave

Vincent, S. (2008) 'A transmutation theory of inter-organizational exchange relations and networks: Applying critical realism to analysis of collective agency', *Human Relations*, 61(6): 875-899.

Yin, R. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, (4th Edition) London: Sage.

**Figure 8.1: Significant types of causal mechanism**